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A Plan for Effective Discussion Boards

Meaningful online discussions that promote learning and build community usually do not happen spontaneously. They require planning, good use of questioning techniques, and incentives for student participation.

Before the course begins, the instructor should consider the purpose of each discussion, how it relates to the learning objectives, and how it can promote deeper thinking, says Elaine Bennington, director of instructional technology, distance education, and adjunct faculty development at Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana.

The first step that Bennington recommends in planning discussion-board use in an online course is to consider how many discussions to include. She recommends at least 12 discussion boards for a 16-week course, focusing on the most controversial, most difficult, and most important concepts. "People don't even think about that for their on-campus courses. Half the time they prepare a three-hour lecture with no time for questions, and that trend has continued online. But you cannot do that. This is your feedback mechanism. This is your listening opportunity, and you've got to prime the pump with the best questions you can think of," Bennington says.

The first discussion in an online course should serve as a way of introducing students to each other and to the use of the discussion forum, including technical issues and netiquette.

Discussions should not be included in courses arbitrarily, Bennington says. Rather, the instructor should build the discussions around the course's learning objectives.

"[Discussions] have got to bring the concept and objective together in a way that brings out more questions. That to me is very important—to relate those objectives and the concepts under those objectives to the discussion board," Bennington says. "The questions allow the students to complete the learning outcomes. The questions in a discussion board are like essay questions on a test where students can give these ideas and then communicate more creatively. But the question in the discussion board is even more important. It allows students more freedom because it is not a test. It allows students to answer a question in a way that a teacher can know that the student has got it."

Here are two key questions to ask when planning a discussion:

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Four Tips for Better Instruction

In course evaluations, 90 percent of the students in John Thompson's graduate-level education courses at the University of San Diego indicated that the online learning experience was as good as or better than the traditional classroom and 91 percent would take another online course.

Thompson attributes much of this positive feedback to his role as instructor and offers the following recommendations:

- **Be specific in the syllabus** so that before the course starts students know what the expectations are.
- **Maintain a presence in the online discussions.** Some institutions require instructors to respond to at least 10 percent or 20 percent of students' postings. Thompson does not agree with quantifying instructor participation, preferring to focus on quality. Thompson responds to every question asked of him and asks questions to elicit more discussion. "My postings typically are not too long. Sometimes, you find instructors that post two or three

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RESEARCH

Three Key Student Satisfaction Factors

Students' satisfaction with the online learning environment is an important part of their success. In a survey of students at Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC), Vickie Fry, division secretary in technologies/culinary art/mathematics/sciences, found that students want the following:

- **Clear communication policies**—The students were satisfied with communication from the instructor, regardless of frequency, as long as the syllabus clearly stated how frequently the instructor would communicate and the instructor followed the policy.
- **A regular schedule**—Even though the courses in the study were asynchronous, many of the students followed a regular schedule. "They definitely want to communicate on at least a weekly basis. Most of the students don't like it when courses are self-paced. We don't allow that in our college, but some instructors tend to want to do that. They want to post all the information at the beginning of the semester and say, 'Here's what's due by May 31.' The students don't seem to like that," Fry says.
- **Updated grades**—The students who were aware of their grades throughout the course were less likely to be dissatisfied with the final grade. "Most who were able to get feedback on their assignments at least weekly were satisfied with the grade they received and felt they had earned the grade they deserved," Fry says.

Students in the survey who had taken at least one online course before were more satisfied with the online learning experience. "I reached the conclusion that if we

can make these first-time online students satisfied with their first online course experience, then we have a pretty good chance of keeping them for subsequent online courses," says Edwin Nelson, chair of computer technology and business at WCCC. "The first course they take is a weeding-out process for those students who think they are capable of learning online and then find out they aren't. The key to student satisfaction is that very first experience they have online."

One telling statistic from the survey was that 96 percent of first-time online learners felt that they were technically ready for the online classroom. Instructors were not as confident in the students' capabilities. Just 49 percent of the instructors surveyed said that they felt that first-time online learners were ready.

WCCC does not require students to take an online learning preparation course. Instead, students are encouraged to take an online self-exam within Blackboard that helps prepare them to learn online. Those who take the self-exam are better prepared and therefore more satisfied with the online learning experience. Although a mandatory one-credit course would ensure that students are well-prepared to learn online, WCCC does not offer one, because it would interfere too much with the students' schedules. "Particularly when they are in a sixty-credit associate degree program, students really don't have room for an additional course," Nelson says.

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- What do I want students to be able to do?
- In what ways do I want students to understand this material?

Answering these questions can help determine the types of questions to ask, says Laurie Kirkner, Internet technician at Ivy Tech.

A course can include different types of online discussions. In addition to an introduction, discussions can be used for reflection, debate, or exploring case studies, among other things. And as a course progresses, the online discussions can help move students to the higher end of Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Types of questions

The asynchronous nature of the discussion board makes it more important to plan specific questions because it's not as easy as in a face-to-face class to ask a follow-up question when your initial question fails to elicit the level of dialogue you had hoped for. This is not to say that all questions in online discussions need to be scripted. Another important role for the instructor is to participate in these discussions and help students explore relevant but unplanned discussion topics and to get them back on topic when they stray too far.

"Spontaneity can be there, but it is not a justification for not planning the initial discussion," Kirkner says.

Initial questions in an online discussion might ask closed questions, which can help establish a set of principles to build upon. But for the most part, threaded discussions

should feature open-ended questions that elicit divergent thinking from the students.

Too often, however, instructors simply ask students to state their independent thinking on a subject and perhaps comment on two classmates' postings. Bennington and Kirkner recommend using the following six Socratic questioning techniques as delineated by Richard Paul (see reference below) to get students involved in discussions that go beyond simply their opinions:

- **Conceptual clarification questions**—questions that get students to think about concepts behind their arguments, for example, Why are you saying that? What exactly does this mean? How does this relate to what we have been talking about? Can you give me an example?
- **Probing assumptions**—questions that get students to think about the beliefs that they base their arguments on, for example, What else could we assume? How did you choose those assumptions? How can you verify or disprove that assumption? What would happen if ...?
- **Probing rationale, reasons, and evidence**—questions that get students to think about the support for their arguments, for example, Why is that happening? How do you know this? Can you give me an example? What do you think causes ...? On what authority are you basing your argument?
- **Questioning viewpoints and perspectives**—questions that get students to consider other viewpoints, for example, What are some alternate ways of looking at this? Who benefits from this? How are x and y similar?

- **Probe implications and consequences**—questions that get students to think about the what follows from their arguments, for example, Then what would happen? What are the consequences of that assumption?
- **Questions about the question**—questions that turn the question in on itself, for example, What was the point of asking that question? Why do you think I asked this question?

Make it count

Bennington and Kirkner recommend grading online discussions according to a rubric that instructors share with students at the outset of the course that considers the quality and quantity of students' postings. "These discussion boards have to be a graded situation so that the students will take them seriously," Bennington says.

There are many online-discussion-grading rubrics out there. The following are links to some examples:

- <http://ois.unomaha.edu/amfarm/Courseinfo/discuss.htm>
- www.cu-portland.edu/its/WebCT/student_orientation/DB_PDX.htm
- www.cos.edu/view_page.asp?nodeid=3885&parentid=3872&moduleid=1

Reference:

Paul, Richard, *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, 1993. @

(Not) Making it Hard(er) to Learn, Part 3

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

So many things in life have “built-in” frustrations. For example, grocery shopping right before a holiday or a looming snowstorm. Grocery stores have implemented self-service checkouts and special checkout lines for people with few items, to reduce waiting-in-line (while your ice cream melts) frustrations, but some frustrations can only be minimized, not eliminated.

There are inevitable frustrations for online learners too. The tools they need to use, such as discussion forums or integrated course management systems, have a learning curve. They don't always behave in intuitive ways. Waiting for communication (responses to a question, work from another learner on a collaborative project, feedback on an assignment, etc.) can be terribly frustrating.

Some frustrations seem “built in,” but they actually result from less-than-optimal design. For example, almost everyone thinks programming a VCR or DVD recorder is too complicated. Is it inherently frustrating? Doubtful.

This may seem counterintuitive, but some frustrations during learning are good. Learners are expected to struggle with new or difficult content. That struggle is part and parcel of the learning process. But there's a fine line between OK struggling and not-OK struggling. My son is a junior in college and struggles with some of the high-level math courses in his degree plan. You'd expect these courses to be hard and struggling with the content to be the norm. So when are learning frustrations harmful? When they negatively impact the ability to learn. One of my son's math professors sent

broadcast emails to every student each week warning them that it would be hard to pass the course and that they should consider dropping out if they weren't up to the work. This turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the anxiety made it impossible for most students to learn.

Because the online learning experience is, by its nature, frustrating, anyone who can take *unnecessary frustration* out should do so, because frustration leads to anxiety and frustration, reduced ability to learn, and attrition.

Usability

What I'm talking about is technical and learning usability, the ease (or lack of ease) with which learners interact with online instructional materials (pages, forms, media, etc.) and people (the instructor, peers, help sources). Good usability for online learning materials means the site, content, and media are easy to find, use, and navigate. And good usability for people means the interaction tools (such as email and discussion forums) are easy to use and facilitate getting input or help as needed.

Technical usability

Good technical usability involves minimizing system-related frustrations (for example, access, course systems, materials, and media) so learners can use them for their intended purpose without unnecessary hassles, delays, or extra steps. Here are some common recommendations for improving technical usability in online courses:

- Use a simple and consistent navigation scheme (for example, tabs labeled with the week number or topic containing all the materials for that week or topic).

- Optimize images and media for quicker downloading.
- Provide a list of required hardware, software, plug-ins, and bandwidth to prospective students so they know what's needed, technically, to succeed.
- Offer printable versions of pages that are likely to be printed, either by providing separate print versions or PDFs or by making sure that existing pages print well.
- Design online courses so they function similarly to each other. Once learners understand how to use one course, they will be able to use others more easily.
- Make materials or pages that are commonly used or referred to readily available without having to navigate through numerous menus and hyperlinks.

Learning usability

Learning usability is about minimizing unnecessary *learning-related* frustrations so learners can learn and deal with the frustrations that cannot be eliminated. Here are some common recommendations for improving learning usability in online courses:

- Manage expectations: Tell learners when to expect a reply to emails or questions so they aren't frustrated when you haven't answered in three minutes. (I encourage you to seem omnipresent in the beginning of courses with a large percentage of new online learners.)
- Make help available: Look at your course content and activities realistically. Any places where students are likely to get stuck? Provide extra help options at these times.

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- Provide reality checks: Let prospective students know what to expect so they can determine if they have the access, motivation, and time for the coursework.

Whose job is this?

Maybe you're thinking this is too much to worry about. It's hard enough designing content, activities, and assessments; facilitating course activities; answering questions; and grading papers and tests. But since the negative outcomes from poor usability end up in the instructors' and students' laps, it's our problem, whether we like it or not.

If you have access to instructional designers, they should be able to help you make your courses easier

to use. If your institution has technical communications or human factors engineering degree programs, there's a good chance that faculty need projects for their students. Free help!

If learners can't easily find what they need and do what they want or need to do, what they need isn't available. If learners cannot easily use and learn from course materials, the instructor, and other students, they can't learn. So, **no matter how good the content, activities, assessments, and people interactions are, if the learner can't easily find and use them, they might as well not be there.**

Next month I'll conclude this series on reducing frustrations by describing some design issues that impact frustration.

Resources

Don't Make Me Think, 2nd Edition (New Riders Press, 2005)

Alertbox—www.useit.com/alertbox

Usability.gov—www.usability.gov

Usability—the Basics—

<http://wdvl.internet.com/Authoring/Design/Basics/>

Why people can't use eLearning—

[www.infocentre.frontend.com/](http://www.infocentre.frontend.com/uploaded_files/eLearning_white_paper.pdf)

[uploaded_files/eLearning_white_paper.pdf](http://www.infocentre.frontend.com/uploaded_files/eLearning_white_paper.pdf)

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized instructional designer and instructional technologist, writer, and author, who builds and helps others build good online and blended courses and facilitate learning. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

Study: Social Presence Perceived Differently By Different Ethnic Groups

Social presence, “the degree to which a medium is perceived as representing the presence of communication participants,” is an important factor in students’ learning and satisfaction. With online learning reaching across cultures, Judy Teng, educational technologist at the College of Saint Rose, studied how ethnicity affects student perceptions of social presence.

Teng administered questionnaires to 59 students (13 of whom were Asian) at three institutions to answer the following research questions:

- How does Asian students’ perception of social presence correlate with their perceived interaction in online discussions? With their perceived learning? With their satisfaction?
- Are there differences in the corre-

lations between Asian and Caucasian students?

- Do they perceive the observed variables differently?

The survey results indicate that students’ perception of social presence was strongly correlated to their perceived learning, their perceived interaction, and their satisfaction with the course.

Asian students, however, perceived less social presence than their Caucasian counterparts did. Although this perceived lower level of social presence was not correlated with significant differences in satisfaction or perceived learning, Teng recommends that instructors pay attention to the issue of ethnicity and how it might affect communication in the online classroom.

She offers the following suggestions for overcoming these differ-

ences in social presence among different ethnicities:

- Provide non-content-related ice-breaker activities at the beginning of the course.
- Teach students how to communicate online.
- Allow students opportunities to express their needs.
- Encourage participation, and acknowledge students’ contributions. @

Share Your Ideas

If you have developed an innovative online course or have some online teaching tips you would like to share with the readers of *Online Classroom*, contact Rob Kelly at [<robkelly@magnapubs.com>](mailto:robkelly@magnapubs.com).

Be Careful, Be Cautious ... of Yourself!

By Errol Craig Sull

During the past five years—especially—we have read more and more of sent emails that have gotten folks fired, castigated, and embarrassed. Indeed, text, pictures, graphs, and charts are no longer confined to the safety of file cabinets, in-boxes, and the U.S. Postal Service; today's world of instant communication has made the exchange of information between folks easy, quick, and readily available. While this is great for many reasons it also opens a new dimension in being cautious, especially in a society where "litigation" is so common, where political (and other) correctness is at its height, where corporations now border on Big Brother in their monitoring of computer use, and where schools are ever more sensitive about proper and professional interaction between faculty and students.

We who have as our passion online teaching and innocently correspond with and "talk" with those who learn from us can be at great risk of falling prey to the unsuspecting minefield of Internet "uh-ohs" and "gotchas" that are just waiting for us. Once "stepped on," the damage has been done, and it often is too late for mending. To keep yourself on top of possible Internet problems between teacher and student, mind the following:

- **Be careful of the words you use in all correspondence.** Once sent, an email can rarely be recalled, so choose your words (and emoticons) wisely. The use of too many contractions, colloquialisms, and cultural references can quickly dissolve your professionalism—and be very careful of slang and never use invectives. Yes, you want your
- own voice, and casual is OK—but "casual professional" is better.
- **Let the tone of your writing be that of a teacher.** The combination of your grammar, writing style, content, and structure equal tone; it's more the "feel" one gets after reading (and in phone conversations you may have with students) than anything else. And each time a student reads your writing (or hears your voice), it should say, "I'm a professional teacher, and my intent in writing this is to help you learn." Period.
- **If you need to share personal info with students, keep it harmless.** Sometimes schools or a syllabus template asks a teacher to share personal info with students; the reasoning is that it makes the teacher seem more real and reachable beyond the cold wasteland of the Internet. If you post personal info, keep it homogenized—interests, family, travel, education, and so forth; what you stay away from: details of relationships, negative thoughts, finances, political leanings, and so forth.
- **Keep students' personal problems at arm's length.** Students bombard teachers with personal problems; sometimes they see online teachers as safe outlets. Yet remember your role is not that of counselor, therapist, or guru: do not encourage students to give you more details; give a polite "That's too bad" and the like (and, when necessary, factor it into the student's course involvement); and if you suspect the student needs help, let a school counselor know.
- **Know well your school's policy on teacher fraternization with students.** This pretty much says
- it all: your school's policy of student-teacher interaction is the umbrella under which you must teach. Period, again.
- **When possible, don't use personal email for student correspondence, but if necessary, make it "student safe."** When a school has its own email system, use it and only it: this makes all your correspondence professional and it can't be said you were doing something "on your own." But when you must use a personal email address, keep it professional; always have a template signature that includes your name and title, course taught, and name of school; and if you include a quote or two at the bottom, be sure that the content reflects well on you.
- **Don't send pictures, and if you post one, be sure it's professional looking.** Yes, you may want students to put a face with your bits and bytes, and that's fine (as long as your school policy has nothing against it), but do so only as a posting—perhaps with your syllabus—and make sure it's a shot that speaks of you as a professional. Sending your picture to students (or anyone else at the school)—no matter how innocent it may be—can send a less-than-professional message.
- **Check your ego at the keyboard.** Students are often in awe and enamored with their online instructors—too much so. While this can be a heady trip, you have only one purpose: to teach your students a subject in the most effective and professional manner possible. Don't lord yourself over your students; don't brag; don't spend too much time

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talking about yourself: in the end, it should be all about them, not you.

- **Don't correspond with students beyond the course's ending.** If you think this is cool because they are no longer officially your students—think again: you are still employed by your school, and thus the only interaction you are expected to have with your students is while they are in your class. Today's world holds many folks to a higher degree of standard than in bygone days—and perhaps none more so than teachers. You simply can't afford to give a hint of impropriety.
- **Be aware of instant messaging (IM).** Students see you online and want to IM (instant message) you. Most of the time their content is class related and innocuous—but it is also not professional correspondence on your part. Be wise in IMing your students so it can't come back to haunt you. (And you may simply want to put up an "I'm away" message so you won't be IM'd.)
- **Monitor chats, discussions, and other communication to keep students professional.** At times students might think a forum is open season to say anything they'd like, but no: they must remain respectful of others, not use trash talk, and never personally attack other students when interacting; if you allow this, it's a reflection on you, on the school. Monitor all.
- **Keep copies of all student emails and other writings that have questionable content.** You can never tell when you'll need to back up your claims or claims against you; the more "proof" you have in writing, the better.

- **Know how to handle students sending you unsolicited pictures, invitations, and so forth.** This happens all the time; 99 percent of the time it's harmless and nothing untoward is meant. But be careful—either a polite "Thank you" but no more will give the message you are not encouraging that these be sent or an up-front "Thanks, but no thanks" policy will eliminate any possibility for misinterpretation.
- **When any potential "bite-you-in-the-rear" situation appears, contact your supervisor.** Better to always come from you first rather than a student or parent: this is called CYA, and your supervisor will respect you for immediately bringing any questionable student correspondence or actions to him or her.
- **Before hitting the send key or button, pause, reread, and rethink.** The seconds spent doing this might just translate into saving your career or, at the very least, maintaining your image as a consummate online teaching professional.

REMEMBER: People focus on the black dot, not the white wall.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errol-craigsull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed; for this column, if you'd like a list of helpful websites to augment this column's subject, just send me an email!

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years and has a national reputation

*in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—a collection of his online teaching activities titled *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*. @*

Resource

UNC at Chapel Hill's Blackboard Course Extractor

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Information Technology Services' Teaching and Learning division has developed a new application and is making it available to the education community. bFree is a course extractor that makes a stand-alone website from any Blackboard course content. While maintaining the organization of the original Blackboard course content, bFree creates a freestanding website or a folder hierarchy.

According to the Information Technology Services website, with bFree, course content authors can conveniently retrieve course materials previously available only in Blackboard; produce independent course websites with the same content and structure as the original course embedded in Blackboard; apply Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to customize the look and feel of a freestanding site; and easily distribute and share course content files with others.

To learn more about bFree or to download the program, go to <http://its.unc.edu/tl/tli/bFree>. @

Use Participation Policies to Improve Interaction

One instructor's study of student participation in online discussions in two of his asynchronous online courses over a five-year period has yielded some interesting results that have influenced how he conducts his courses.

John Thompson, associate professor in the computer information systems department at Buffalo State College, employed the user-statistics feature within the Blackboard course management system in the courses he taught online through the University of San Diego. The courses were six-week asynchronous graduate-level education courses mandated by the State of California for teacher certification. In each course, discussion was a significant component that counted for 41 percent of each student's final grade.

Not surprisingly, the incentive to participate in the online discussions encouraged participation, but simply mandating participation and making it a substantial part of the course grade does not guarantee the quality of participation that adds to the learning experience.

For example, the University of San Diego requires that each student post seven acceptable messages—those that advance the discussion in some way—each week. The majority of students met this minimum requirement each week, but Thompson found that approximately half of the postings occurred in the last two days of the week, which often made the discussions less productive than they might have been otherwise had students participated throughout the week. “Left on their own, students will have a disproportionate number of postings in the last couple of days in the week. You really need to take a look at that. If

that's OK with you, that's fine, but what I find, if left on their own, students have far too many postings done to satisfy a requirement,” Thompson says.

To encourage students to post earlier, Thompson requires a minimum of seven postings from each student during the first four days of each week. Thompson deducts points for failure to meet this requirement.

In addition, each week had seven to nine discussions, and Thompson found that most students tended to post messages to the first two discussions and neglected the others. To counteract this tendency, Thompson required students to post at least one message to each discussion.

Thompson also looked at the time of day that students accessed their online courses. “Before I started the study, I would assume, based on informal conversations, that a lot of this work or maybe even the bulk of it would occur during the workday when students had access to computers, going online during breaks or before or after school when they had better connections. What I found out was that the two most common times were between eight and nine and between nine and ten at night.”

This finding was somewhat surprising to Thompson. However, because his courses were asynchronous, this did not have any effect on the way he conducted these courses. If he decided to include a synchronous component, this information would give him an indication as to when students might be available.

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long paragraphs. I may do that occasionally, but more often my postings are in response to a specific question from a student or if a student [posts] something that is over the top or an unsubstantiated claim. ... I try to get into a Socratic dialogue, asking why and drawing them out without being viewed as a crazy guy who keeps asking questions.”

- **Decide on your role.** Depending on your course design, learning outcomes, and teaching style, your role as instructor will vary, but you should consciously decide what that role will be, Thompson says. “Are you there just as a lurker? Are you just asking an occasional question here or there? Are you an active participant? What do you mean by ‘active participant’? Are you a cop? Are you a super student or instructor?”
- **Keep discussions informal, interesting, and engaging.** “Make discussions relevant to the course. You do not want students to view discussions as fluff,” Thompson says. In addition to focusing on the course readings, encourage students to discuss how the material relates to their lives. @